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*Donya Washington, Alliance Theatre Off-Site season producer, with Dana Hylton-Calabro, part-time front-of-house manager, and Christina Dresser, database and content manager, at the Atlanta Botanical Garden in preparation for a production "A Midsummer Night's Dream." (Photo by Ariel Tinter)*

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## Here, There, and Everywhere: The Alliance Theatre's Season On the Road

*How Atlanta's flagship theatre planned and staged an entire season off-campus, and what they learned about their city and their audience in the bargain.*

**BY KELUNDRA SMITH**

**Turning 50 is a big deal, especially for a theatre, and nothing prompts reflection—and possibly a new direction—more than a milestone. For [the Alliance Theatre](#), one thing this**

golden anniversary meant was that it was time for some reconstructive surgery. In 2015, they announced plans to trim their 770-seat house down to 650 seats to create a more intimate audience experience, and planned for some technological enhancements to make better facilities for their artists.

But while most theatres either go on hiatus during renovation, or look for a single space to nest in the interim, Susan V. Booth, the Alliance's artistic director, decided to do something different. Instead of minimizing risk, she dared to maximize it by producing a full season off-campus, at a variety of Atlanta venues.

"There's a phrase I learned during tech for an Alliance show back when I was living in Chicago and just working there as an artist: If you can't fix it, feature it," Booth said. "There are no problems, just opportunities. When this became a reality, that we were going to be out of our home base, what was stirring was the notion of, what can we do with this? The typical narrative is to try to lose as little as possible, but I was curious about whether there was a different narrative available. We've known for a long time that people come from all over to Midtown, that the market is changing, and we live in a traffic-challenged city. This seemed like we could have a year-long laboratory to figure out a new way of thinking and producing."

There was no model for doing this, for one thing because it makes zero financial sense. Booth didn't ask colleagues at other theatres for their thoughts; she was afraid they'd talk her out of it. But she did consult her staff and board, fully prepared to be met with skepticism.

"Let it be said early and often: I am beyond lucky to work with the people I work with," Booth said. "That said, it took a little 'stump speeching' to convince them. But here's the thing: We take our mission and responsibility to this city very seriously. As soon as it made perfect Alliance sense—the why—then people came on board to figure out the how. I needed to be open to the possibility that the staff would tell me this was a bad idea." Not only didn't they object strongly, she said; by the time they opened *Sheltered* last March, the staff "acted like this was the most natural, normal, cool

thing in the world.”

Once the decision was made to make all of ATL their stage for a season, Booth and managing director Mike Schleifer went about the business of finding the funds to pay rental fees, hire additional staff, and extend marketing activities for an off-campus season. The Alliance is located in the [Woodruff Arts Center](#), in Atlanta's booming Midtown neighborhood. The third largest arts center in the country, home to the Alliance, High Museum of Art, and Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Woodruff gets less than one percent of its funding from the government, so its resident arts organizations are heavily reliant on the generosity of foundations, corporations, and individual donors.



Susan V. Booth. (Photo by Ross DeLoach)

Adding to the pressure, Schliefer said, was that in order to get construction started early, the theatre packed in 12 shows in a very contracted season while moving all of our shops off campus. “But we planned it so well that executing has not been nearly as painful.”

They also executed a national search for an off-site season producer to help find the best venues, manage the rental budget, and ensure that proper communication about the nuances of each show was shared with the staff. After six months of searching they hired Donya Washington, who had previously been a production assistant at the [Oregon Shakespeare Festival](#). Washington had never visited Atlanta prior to accepting the position, so she got to know the city by helping to search for venues to stage the productions.

“We made an opportunity out of a potential problem,” Washington said, noting that when she interviewed for the position the plan wasn't “12 shows in 12 venues,” though the season would end up taking 12 shows to 13 venues. The plan also wasn't necessarily to have Washington stick around: She was initially hired to help plan and execute just the on-the-road season, but a grant from the [BOLD Theater Women's Initiative](#)—which funds an artistic leader taking on a young mentor—means she will be staying on at the Alliance as

the company moves into its newly renovated space, and beyond.

As for the 2017-18 season experiment, Washington said, “I think we’ll see the benefit of it when we come back home. The people we’ve met, the people who’ve come to see us that never saw us before—it’s been a cool thing to be a part of.”

And it’s been something to observe as well. Over the 2017-18 season, I attended all but one show and interviewed theatre staff and board members at various points throughout the season to get their updates on how it was going. Hours of interviews later, some common themes emerged. The main one: An off-campus season requires increased bandwidth, but it is not impossible. The other takeaways are best compiled into a how-to guide. Thinking of taking your season on the road? Here’s how.



## STEP ONE: Plan Ahead

The team at the Alliance Theatre started planning for their off-campus season in 2015. Still, when Washington arrived, the only venues that were firm-ish were the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Center for *A Christmas Carol* and the Atlanta Botanical Garden for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (currently running through Oct. 21), the final off-campus show of the renovation period. So she created a spreadsheet of everything a venue would possibly need to host an Alliance production, then made sure that all stakeholders had a chance to review that list as she set about searching for locations. At one point, they had about 40 venue possibilities in contention and had to narrow the list down from there.

“One thing that’s fantastic about Atlanta is that everyone was willing to have a conversation with us,” Washington said. “People were welcoming and enthusiastic to play, which I think would only be true in Atlanta. We know what’s possible and what we’re capable of. I

came up in New York, and New York is such a competitive town; I think the competition for space and resources would make this so much harder to do at this scale.”

The process of matching venue to technical needs to text was much like completing a Rubik's Cube, and different factors influenced each show. For example, with two new plays by resident playwright Pearl Cleage, the Alliance team saw performing at the Southwest Arts Center, home to [Kenny Leon's True Colors Theatre Company](#), as an opportunity to engage a new audience.

“We did a heat map of our audience when we were preparing for the season and discovered that we weren't very hot in Southwest Atlanta, but we know that there are theatre patrons out there,” Washington said. “We wanted to meet some of those people, have them get to know us, and bring some of our folks down there so they could go back when they see Kenny is doing a show. Pearl lives in that neighborhood, and had never had a show in her own neighborhood.”

In addition to finding the venues and raising funds, the theatre also had to prepare to survive a deficit. The Alliance is a Tony-winning LORT theatre\* with more than 6,300 subscribers and nearly 85,000 single-ticket buyers in an average season. For the on-the-road season they adjusted their sales goals and overall expectations, knowing that their usual patrons wouldn't follow them to every neighborhood. They wound up with 5,799 subscribers (a 9 percent decrease) and 67,625 single ticket buyers (a 20 percent decrease) in the on-the-road season.

“Often when you travel, you learn more about where you're from than where you are, and I do feel like that's been true of the off-site season,” Washington said. “We've learned a lot about who we are, what our building is like—there are things we took for granted.”



## STEP TWO: Get the Board on Board

The Alliance Theatre has a 68-member board of directors comprising artistic, civic, and business leaders from across the metropolitan area. For this season the board was divided into teams for each show, based on the neighborhoods where they had connections and their affinity for the subject matter. Each team was responsible for getting the word out about their production and helping to establish community partnerships in the area where the show was produced.

Board co-chair Hala Modellmog elected to be on the team for *Native Guard* by Georgia resident and former U.S. poet laureate Natasha Trethewey. The theatre originally produced the show in 2014, and reprised it with the original cast for the mobile season. Modellmog, who is the president and CEO of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, leveraged her connections to get the governor involved.

“I chose *Native Guard* as my play because I love poetry,” Modellmog said. “I have a good relationship with Governor and [First Lady] Mrs. Deal, so we asked if we could have our opening party for *Native Guard* at the governor’s mansion and have Natasha and Susan speak. It was magical.”

(Another opportunity that grew out of the mobile season’s spirit of partnership was a

team-up with [L.A. Theatre Works](#) for an audio recording of *Native Guard* for NPR Los Angeles. Theatre Works, which stages and records plays in a radio style, reached out to the Alliance about getting a grant to do something bigger. After the Alliance run, the original cast reconvened in L.A. for the recording; it is scheduled to air on NPR in February 2019.)

“Nobody wanted this season to not be a success,” Modellmog said. “We wanted to make very sure that the publicity and board support would be there, and it absolutely worked. They made their numbers, and we picked up a lot of subscribers and single-ticket buyers. We’re thrilled with the outreach.”



### STEP THREE: Establish Community Partnerships

When talking about Atlanta, it’s important to understand the terms OTP and ITP: outside the perimeter and inside the perimeter. People who live outside of the I-285 freeway are OTP, those who live inside of 285 are ITP. The Alliance is located ITP, and Booth said that they figured out pretty quickly that it’s easier to get people who live OTP to come into the city than it is to get people who live ITP to go out to the suburbs.

Luckily, since the theatre’s education programs travel to communities and schools around the state, the family-friendly shows gave them a model of how to create mutually beneficial partnerships with various entities.

They started the season by partnering with the High Museum of Art to run an exhibition of book illustrations while *The Dancing Granny* went on a mini-tour to three venues, including Spelman College. This prepared them for the season to come.

“Often we get sunk in scarcity thinking and we get caught up in our own fiscal years,”

Booth said. “But we live in this ecosystem where all of these nonprofit organizations are committed to making our city a better place, and we’re so intertwined. We get better when we depend on one another.”

The Alliance education department comprises 14 full-time staff members and a cohort of about 50 teaching artists. To prepare to go on the road, the education department started sending teaching artists into schools in the communities where the shows would be staged a year before the plays opened. They also hosted camps and workshops at the different venues, and for a production of *The Jungle Book* they hosted a family festival for the community.

“We drew up a calendar to make sure we had relationships with schools in those zip codes, so we had a presence with the educators, schools, and families, and when they saw that the Alliance was coming there was already a relationship started,” said Christopher Moses, the director of education and associate artistic director. “We also had a plan to continue those relationships after we left.”

Indeed the ending of the on-the-road season is bittersweet for his department, Moses confessed.

“I would love to always have one of our family shows tour the city,” he said. “That’s one of the best ways to establish a bond with new people. It’s critical for us to remain relevant in this city. There are so many people who still don’t feel invited on the Woodruff campus, and this is a way to start that relationship.”





## STEP FOUR: Over-Communicate

Like most theatres, prior to the mobile season the marketing team at the Alliance spent most of their time convincing people to come to their Midtown campus to see shows in one of their two performance spaces. But this season presented multiple communications challenges for patrons and staff. With 13 distinct venues in different neighborhoods, the marketing and patron relations teams had to work hard to make sure audiences knew where each show was taking place, where to park, what eateries were nearby, and how to retrieve tickets.

“We leaned into the idea of going on the road and did a ‘Go Guide’ for the season that looks a lot like a travel guide,” said Jessica Boatright, director of marketing. “We talked to people in the community about their favorite places to eat near each venue, and included info on where to park, how to get there. We started thinking about each show as a destination instead of just a performance.”

In addition to producing a lot of collateral material, the marketing had to get creative about their paid placement. They typically target big magazines and newspapers in town, but to make this season a success they relied on hyperlocal media, mommy bloggers, and influencers to spread the word. They also leveraged geographic targeting in digital advertising for the first time to promote each show.

“The most challenging part has been the reinvention of marketing for every show,” Boatright added. “Typically we can build upon the success or experience of the previous show, but for every show we had to reeducate the audience on how to get there, whether we would have concessions, and what the experience would be like. Similarly, with the marketing campaign, we would work with our digital agency and map out the season based on

audience, but we also had to layer geography into that.”

They also had to get out into the community, especially in neighborhoods where they weren't people's first option for entertainment. When they took *Hand to God* to the hipster haven of the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood, they worked hard to get the word out about the show. Luckily, since they were in *Dad's Garage* improv troupe's new building in a former church, both the venue and audience could not have been better fits for the irreverent show about a demonic puppet who takes over a church basement. They promoted the show at the area's annual Bacon Fest and handed out Tyrone finger puppets at the Little Five Points Halloween Parade.

“You can't possibly message enough of what you're doing,” Schleifer said. “We send out email blasts, postcards, and phone calls, and every production someone still showed up at the Woodruff. Another challenge is that there are certain things you don't think about from the production side, like circuits don't work, or there's no house staff, or there's a flood or insect problem. There have been a bunch of challenges, but you anticipate all that you can and triage through the surprises.”



*The Alliance Theatre during renovation this past year.*

## **STEP FIVE: Keep Thinking Local**

Following the notion of turning potential flaws into features, the entire staff strove to make each show an event for the audience. Throughout the season, a cutout of a car appeared at each venue, in which patrons could snap photos, and commemorative “pass-ports” they could get stamped.

The season’s casting was also designed with maximum local attraction in mind, bringing many Atlanta theatre favorites back for more than one show as directors and actors. Performers Andrew Benator, Terry Burrell, Neal Ghant, Tinashe Kajese-Bolden, and Tess

Malis Kincaid came back from film and television work to play lead roles. Booth hired David Catlin from [Lookingglass Theatre](#) in Chicago to helm *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Richard Garner, the former artistic director of Georgia Shakespeare, which [shuttered after 30 years](#) in operation in 2014, to direct *Shakespeare in Love*.

"This was a monumental risk, and it didn't feel like a smart decision at first, but now it does," Schleifer said. "We have so much sophistication on our board and on our staff that we have been able to pull this off. We're not going to make as much money being off-campus as we would have on campus. But I can't put a price tag on the profile raising locally and nationally that this season has given us."

Now as the team prepares to head home to an enhanced space, there are new possibilities to lean into. They will open the new Coca-Cola Stage in 2019 with an ambitious new musical production of *Ever After*, under Booth's direction. The Alliance will not have a full season in the new space until 2020, but one thing everyone agrees on is that producing shows in other spaces is something that will become a part of their DNA.

"I have loved the adventure of this year," Booth added. "I have loved that we've gotten to meet some many people who have never been here before. We tested whether or not the Alliance was something that existed outside of a space, and I'm glad we got to test it because I like the answer. We have an identity for people in Atlanta that isn't about our building. Now we have to honor it and make good on it."

## The Season in Review

When the Alliance hit the road for its 2017-18, they didn't know what to expect. Here's a show-by-show look back at how this roving experiment fared.

**Show:** *The Dancing Granny* by Jireh Breon Holder

**Venue(s):** Spelman College, Galloway School, Oglethorpe University

**Percentage of ticket sales goal met:** 123.6 percent

"To be able to take a show into a community and discuss it with that community is the rea-

son I'm a playwright," said Holder, the [2017 Kendeda Graduate Playwriting Award](#) winner. "It was a dream come true, and I am grateful that the Alliance allowed me to be the voice for that adaptation."

### ***Shakespeare in Love* by Lee Hall**

Oglethorpe University Conant Performing Arts Center

63.7 percent

"For those of us who had worked at Georgia Shakespeare, it was a homecoming full of nostalgia and love," said Bethany Anne Lind, who played Viola. "But we couldn't let ourselves get bogged down in over-sentimentality. The play ends in heartbreak, but also with a hopefulness that says 'Onward!'"

### ***Hand to God* by Robert Askins**

Dad's Garage

113.4 percent

Said Alliance a.d. Susan V. Booth, "There's a group of women who are supporters of our theatre, and they're women of a certain age and ZIP code, and when I saw them having the time of their lives at Dad's Garage, I said: This is so great."

### ***Alice Between* by Neeley Gossett and Steve Coulter**

Rich Theatre at the Woodruff Arts Center

146 percent

"There are awkward moments that are universal for all middle schoolers," said co-writer Gossett. "The idea of nonsense is universal for them, and that is why *Alice in Wonderland* works so well as a seminal text."

### ***Crossing Delancey* by Susan Sandler**

Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta

68.2 percent

"It was exciting to be able to take a show to the JCC that makes sense for the people in that building, but also makes sense for who we are as the Alliance because," said off-site season producer Donya Washington. "As Susan likes to say, 'It's a show that makes you

feel on the way to thinking something.”

### ***A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens**

Cobb Energy Performing Arts Center

108 percent

“We needed a venue of good size because we needed to accommodate all of the student matinees we do for that show,” said Washington. “We didn’t want this to be the year where a kid missed a chance to see *A Christmas Carol*, because going with the school might be their only chance.”

### ***Native Guard* by Natasha Tretheway**

Atlanta History Center

114.3 percent

In this case the choice of venue created a certain amount of friction, as Booth related. “When we realized the kind of conversation that was happening around *Native Guard*, because people were seeing one narrative of the Civil War, and then walking across the hall and encountering another one, and they were having to deal with the storm front of those two mutually exclusive narratives—I think going forward when we decide there’s a story we want to tell, we should ask, what’s the right place to do that?”

### ***The Jungle Book* by Tracey Power, adapted from the novel by Rudyard Kipling with composition by S. Renee Clark**

Porter Sanford III Performing Arts Center

113.8 percent

“Engaging the families was really important,” said Christopher Moses, the Alliance’s director of education and associate artistic director. “We offered family storytelling workshops, arts and crafts, plus we had the High and the Symphony out there as well. It’s a way to have a presence beyond simply performing in that neighborhood.”

### ***Sheltered* by Alix Sobler**

Actor’s Express

157.8 percent

“We tend to have a smaller expectation for the Kendeda shows because they’re straight plays in a small space, and this show has a difficult subject matter by a lesser known playwright,” said Alliance marketing director Jessica Boatright. “And it was a show that we out-sold our capacity to seat people. It was not the one I expected to do so well.”

### ***Hospice and Pointing at the Moon* by Pearl Cleage**

Southwest Arts Center

42.1 percent

“I was truly happy to give my neighbors a chance to see my plays in their own backyard, and I loved being able to introduce some members of our Alliance audience to a performance space in a predominantly African American neighborhood they might not have discovered on their own,” said [Cleage](#), resident playwright at the Alliance Theatre.

### ***Candide* by Leonard Bernstein, Richard Wilbur, John Latouche, Stephen Sondheim, and Hugh Wheeler**

Atlanta Symphony Hall

188.4 percent

“We upset some people with *Candide*,” concedes managing director Mike Schliefer. “I like plays where on the car ride home people decide they’re going to cancel their subscription because they’re mad at what we did, and a couple of other people decide they’re going to make a donation because they’re so excited by what we did. That is the theatre that I find most engaging and most interesting.”

### ***A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare**

Atlanta Botanical Garden

131 percent (with three weeks left in the run)

“You really couldn’t ask for a more perfect location for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than the verdant splendor of the Atlanta Botanical Gardens,” said Chicago-based director David Catlin. “As audiences leave, I hope they’ll imagine mischievous fairies hiding behind each blooming water lily and consider the ephemeral beauty of both blooming flowers and the fleeting communal experience that is theatre.”

*\*An earlier version of this article stated the Alliance is a LORT A theatre; in fact it has two stages, one a LORT B and the other a LORT D.*

**Kelundra Smith is an arts journalist based in Atlanta.**

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